

BOOK REVIEW

Ian Marsh¹

**Richard M Ward, *Print Culture, Crime and Justice in 18th Century London*
London: Bloomsbury (History of Crime, Deviance and Punishment), 2014 315pp.
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The more the history of crime and justice is studied the more strongly are we reminded that there really is nothing new under the sun. Richard Ward's impressive examination of the media's reporting of crime and justice in the eighteenth century certainly echoes more contemporary concerns about the role of the media in relation to criminal behaviour and the responses to it. Indeed, the final sentence of this detailed and intriguing study, asking whether the media reporting of the time causes or reflects public attitudes to crime, might have been posed at any time over the last 200 or so years.

Ward argues that the first half of the eighteenth century saw an explosion in the scope of literature about crime and justice, suggesting it 'was a golden age of writing about crime' (p.19). He highlights how at this time the property owning Londoners had access to a far wider array of printed material about crime and criminals than ever before. As well as this, the discussion of open justice in chapter three illustrates how Londoners had a first-hand view and knowledge of crime and the courts and so a 'direct experience' of crime and justice (p.54).

The study itself is a meticulous analysis of a range of printed crime literature along with judicial records of the time. After describing the expansion of the printed press as being in part at least due to a more conducive infrastructure - larger printing presses, better transport network and greater adult literacy for example – Ward details how crime and justice became a, if not the, key theme in this expanding media. Interest in crime and justice was further encouraged by the open access to courts and to the public punishment of offenders; and the fascination for these issues was for much the same reasons as our current interest – incredulity, vicarious pleasure, voyeurism and a desire to see wrongs punished appropriately. And, as today, the print news veered between titillation and lewd commentary and more serious or staid reporting.

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The notion of moral panic is a recurrent theme which Ward utilises to highlight the impact of the media in creating and shaping public concern through increased reporting, exaggeration and distortion; and how such panics had a significant impact on official and private responses to crime. In fact, the policing of printed publications at a period when crime was being seen as an increasingly pressing issue is considered in chapter four. Ward illustrates how there was a gradual move to believing that policing could help catch criminals rather than relying on some kind of divine justice and retribution. There was a growing faith in empirical detection and as he puts it 'a declining cultural purchase for the active hand of God'. Of course such changes did not happen overnight but Ward argues that the balance undeniably 'helped to shift confidence in inexorable justice from God to man' (p. 156).

In examining the reasons behind and impact of the 1752 Murder Act, Ward suggests that it reflected a growing fear of murder consequent on the rise in the number of murders committed and the increased coverage of it. The draconian measures – sentence followed by execution within a week, bodies handed over to surgeons or hung in chains – are seen as another example of moral panic over law and order. The manner in which the post-1748 crime wave in London was reported created fears about crime and murder specifically and was crucial in generating that moral panic. Public anxieties were exaggerated, new control measures promoted and the speed with which social problems were created and responses devised was transformed.

In concluding his argument that the first half of the eighteenth century was a 'golden age' of the printed reporting of crime, Ward pulls together the key features that help to explain and understand these developments. These included the ubiquity of crime, the insatiable appetite for printed accounts of crime and justice, the overwhelming focus on street crimes of violence and the media presentation of a distorted picture which exaggerated fear of crime. All features which mirror contemporary issues and concerns. As ever and now, authors, editors and publishers played a key role in the explosion of crime news, framing their printed crime reports according to their notions of 'newsworthiness' and reader interests. They were commercial operators, dependent on sales for survival.

The argument of this extremely well-written and researched book is that developments in the nature of printed crime reporting in early eighteenth century London were vital in heightening fears of crime and in promoting draconian policies and punishments. The fact that such arguments can be used throughout the recent history of the media portrayal of crime and justice does not make this study any less interesting or important. It is a detailed study of crime reporting that examines the influence of print on contemporary perceptions of crime and the

administration of justice. The focus is on the relationship between the media, public life and criminal justice policy; and the detail is on how the changing nature of printed crime literature in the eighteenth century might be considered a cause, as well as symptom, of changing public attitude to crime.

Even if the history of crime and justice might be characterised by the idea that the more that changes the more stays the same, or to put it more elegantly 'plus ça change', that does not make it any the less fascinating.